

Meal Deals, Combos and Bundling: the impact on the nutrition composition of children's meals in restaurants.

Abstract

Increased consumption of food outside the home means that the nutritional content of meals served in restaurants now makes a significant contribution to overall diet. Children's menus in restaurants, usually aimed at those aged 10 years and younger, are frequently high in energy, fat, salt, sugar and lack variety. The food and drink on children's menus are often bundled together as a combo or meal deal that may be convenient to order and sometimes, but not always, cheaper. Bundling has the potential to add additional foods that may not have been selected individually thus increasing the amount ordered and consumed. Substituting some meal deal items for healthier options has the potential to make it easier to eat well when eating outside the home and improve dietary intakes. However the impact of such measures on child health have yet to be fully explored.

In the UK it has been reported that 20% of children and 27% of adults eat out at least once every week⁽¹⁾. In America it is stated that 36% of children aged 2-19 years eat at a fast-food restaurant on a typical day⁽²⁾. Eating in restaurants has now become a regular occurrence rather than an occasional treat^(3,4). Given that the incidence of overweight and obesity are still rising^(5,6) and levels of obesity disproportionately affect children living in deprived areas^(6,7) we need to consider the way unhealthy foods are promoted and how we can facilitate parents to make healthy choices for their children including when eating out of the home.

In the linked paper, Dunn and colleagues⁽⁸⁾ consider the Nutrition Composition of Children's Meals in 26 Large U.S. Chain Restaurants. The authors highlight that not only do restaurants frequently sell unhealthy individual menu items but they are often bundled into combinations such as a meal deal that include a main dish, a side order or a dessert and a beverage at a discounted price. Even when healthier sides and beverages are available they are rarely included as the default meal deal. This paper investigated and found that when the default meals advertised were compared with the minimum and maximum versions that can be chosen, nutrient values differed significantly. For example, they found default meals on average contained 584 kcal whereas the minimum option was 400 kcal and the maximum was 792 kcal; similar patterns were seen for fat, sodium and sugar. Some items in particular were found to have a salient effect; substituting a beverage for a low calorie version

or water could reduce energy intakes by on average 100 kcal and sugar by 20 grams, and substituting side orders such as French fries resulted in the greatest reductions in fat and salt. They proposed that restaurants could repackage their meal deals by simply substituting healthier items that in most cases the restaurants already offered, a simple strategy requiring neither reformulation nor investment. Thus they showed that realistic modifications can significantly alter a meals nutrient composition, and that relatively simple changes to beverages and side dishes have the potential to reduce energy, fat, salt and sugar, paving the way for healthier options to be the default options. This confirms the findings from one of our own studies⁽⁹⁾ that highlighted the extent to which additional courses and drinks in default meal deals offered on children's menus in restaurants substantially contribute to the energy content of a meal in the UK and Ireland. In particular, by choosing the meal deal option, often seen as more convenient and sometimes, but not always cheaper, parents are perhaps unknowingly ordering meals that have higher levels of energy, fat, salt and sugar.

Marketing practices, that often include a toy⁽¹⁰⁾, can persuade increased consumption by using meal bundling and default meals to override individual decisions that encourage customers to buy items together that they may not have chosen if each item was listed separately⁽¹¹⁾. Bundling may also give the perceived impression of better value for money^(12,13). Furthermore in some restaurants the sheer number of options to choose from can make selecting the healthier choice more complicated than it should be⁽¹²⁾. Bundling and meal deals also provide a perception norm⁽¹⁴⁾ and gives the notion that the constituent items complement each other⁽¹³⁾. This includes desserts and drinks that when included in a meal deal are more likely to be ordered and consumed⁽¹⁵⁾. Thus bundles increase the purchase of calories which naturally leads to greater consumption⁽¹⁶⁾.

Given that customers often revert to the default menus⁽¹⁵⁾, simple substitutions have the potential to improve the nutrient composition of meals on children's menus in restaurants. There are other studies that have measured the effectiveness of substituting items in different meal deals^(17,18). Similarly to the Dunn *et al.*⁽⁸⁾ findings, an Australian study found that choosing water rather than a sugar sweetened beverage could significantly reduce the amount of energy consumed. An American cross-sectional study of 483 restaurant receipts showed that 60% of beverages purchased were sugar sweetened and uncoupling sugary beverages from a meal deal could reduce calorie and sugar intakes, since in this study, meals with non-sugar sweetened beverage had on average 179 kcal less than meals with sugar sweetened beverage⁽¹⁷⁾. Thus it would appear that eliminating a sugar sweetened beverage offers the easiest way to reduce calories and sugar from a fast food meal. This highlights that a simple move, such as restaurants offering tap water as default, could have a significant effect^(7,19). Simple

modifications or optimal defaults can nudge choices in a positive direction⁽¹⁵⁾. Bundled meals have been reported as being popular with parents as long as they could choose the individual items that were included^(12 20). One qualitative study revealed that parents thought healthier defaults could facilitate ordering and in their view “help other parents”⁽¹²⁾. Modifications to children’s menus to make them healthier e.g. increasing fruit and vegetable dishes, providing water, and the removal of automatic defaults for fries and sugar sweetened beverages, can result in healthier offerings without removing choice or reducing revenue, so restaurants can remain competitive⁽²¹⁾.

In addition to bundling, children’s menus are often reported as generally lacking in variety⁽⁹⁾, and Hay⁽²²⁾ raised the question why do kid’s menus in the UK always have chicken nuggets? A study in Germany also noted that the range of dishes on offer for children is severely restricted and in need of improvement⁽²³⁾. Of course children are not limited to only choosing from food from the children’s menus and can choose from the main restaurant menu; some restaurants may not even have a children’s menu. However an American study showed that 63% of parents do choose from the children’s menu and this was higher in children under the age of ten years⁽²⁰⁾. Clearly, restaurants could consider designing their children’s menus to include some variety and make the healthy choice the easiest choice⁽¹²⁾ however the full impact of such measures on child health have yet to be explored.

As reported in the linked paper by Dunn and colleagues⁽⁸⁾, in America, some states have taken legislative action to ensure restaurants provide healthy beverages with children meals as default, however less emphasis has been given to other parts of children’s menus. In the UK, the 2016 sugar levy was a positive step to help improve the quality of beverages on offer, however it is evident that there is still more work to be done on the menus in many chain restaurants^(9,24,25). The second chapter of the UK Childhood Obesity: a plan for action⁽²⁶⁾, included proposals for several food environment interventions such as restrictions on unhealthy food advertising and greater support for using planning regulations to improve local food environments. A calorie reduction programme also challenged all food and drink companies including restaurants and takeaways to reduce energy by 20% in a range of everyday foods consumed by children by 2024 with additional recommendations to introduce legislation for consistent calorie labelling in the out of home sector. More recently the Chief Medical Officers independent report on child obesity⁽⁷⁾ stated a number of recommendations including fiscal measures to favour healthier options such as calorie caps on food and drink sold outside the home, nutritional labelling, and free drinking water to be available for all customers in on-site premises. Emphasising that there is a clear need to consider the role of the food environment and the nutritional value of food and beverages consumed outside the home in relation to childhood obesity.

These studies show that there is a trend for families and young children to eat increasingly frequently outside of the home. This is not to say that families should not enjoy an occasional treat, however we do need to recognise that if opting to eat out on a more regular basis then the nutritional content of the food served in restaurants can make significant contributions to the overall diet. Changing the occasional restaurant meal to a healthier one may not have a great impact on obesity risk⁽²⁷⁾, however it should be easier to eat out healthily and be possible, even sustainable, to eat in restaurants as part of an overall healthy diet^(19, 28). Furthermore it is recognised that children's menus in restaurants are just one component of the complex problem that is obesity, and thus only an innovative and multifaceted approach^(29, 30) that includes policy changes⁽³¹⁾, transformation of the food supply^(32,33) as well as changes to the environment, will solve.

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